Ecotourism Socio-Cultural Implications: Mexican Caribbean
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Abstract
This paper is a view of the Maya culture related to ecotourism. Unity in ethnic Mayan is an important issue. Generally Mayan families are large, usually eight members. This was evidenced in the questionnaire administered to locals in San Juan, Punta Allen and Xcalak. The survey was designed with the purpose of understanding ‘Mayan Culture’, and determining the influence of tourist in the lives of the locals; the evidence was not conclusive. The perception within the communities was that there was little or no change.

In conclusion, the success of the Mayan community-based ecotourism strongly depends on support socio-cultural resources and intervention of local communities by governmental authorities, NGOs, and the private sector.

Key Words: Sociocultural, Ecotourism, Mayan zone, México.
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Introduction

Mayan culture flourished in the Classic period in between AD 300 to AD 900 (Britannica, 1999). Great ceremonial centres such as Palenque, Tikal, and Copán were built. Mayan culture also produced a remarkable architecture, of which great ruins remain at a large number of places, including Palenque, Uxmal, Mayapán, Tikal, Copán, Uaxactún, Tulum, Cobá, and Chichen Itzá. These sites were vast centres for religious ceremonies (Britannica, 1999). Mayans had a great knowledge of mathematics and astrology. The Mayan religion centred on the worship of a large number of nature gods. Chac, the god of rain, was, and is, especially important in popular rituals. Among the supreme deities were Kukulcan, the god of creation closely related to the Toltec and Aztec Quetzalcoatl, and Itzamná, a sky god. About AD 900 however, the Mayan centres were mysteriously abandoned. During the Post-Classic period, from AD 900 to the arrival of the Spanish in the 16th century, Mayan civilization centred in Yucatan (Smart, 1992).

Sociocultural Values of the Mayan Communities

Nowadays, the Mayan culture represents an important tourism attraction for the region. Its Mayan sites rank among Mexico’s greatest attractions (Cothran and Cothran 1998, p.481). The Mayan culture is rich in traditions and customs, and the actual Mayans still respectfully maintain their ancient traditions. It is still possible to witness a ceremony in honor of the rain god, or a Mayan baptism in Mayan villages. Ethnic Mayans perform numerous festivals and cultural events during the year. Generally these festivals and events are also closely related to the Catholic religion, especially those religious celebrations which mark important times in the sun’s yearly cycle of dry and wet seasons and which have become the focus of pilgrimage (Faust, 1991). These celebrations play important roles in helping to maintain cultural traditions and values.

Unity in ethnic Mayan families is an important issue. Generally Mayan families are large. There are usually no less than eight members including the parents, who can be counted in an ordinary Mayan family. This was evidenced in the questionnaire surveys administered to individuals and households in San Juan, Punta Allen and Xcalak. The oldest sons and/or daughters do not usually leave the house until they get married, and even when married they usually remain in the same house with their children. Although the oldest father is the head of the Mayan family, the mother plays a significant role leading the home (Jufresa, personal communication, San Juan, 1998). In the Mayan culture mothers play crucial roles, first, as mothers and providers of shelter, education and food; and second, as significant contributors to the familiar income, as in most developing countries (Rodda, 1993, p.6). The next section explains the role of women in Mayan communities.

The Role of Women in the Mayan Society

The role of women is also very important in the Mayan society. Wives for instance play a highly significant role in the prosperity and unity of the Mayan family. In most of the cases they also play a leading role in conducting the household. For example, wives are the only ones who register children at schools and attend to parent-school meetings, husbands rarely accompany them, although schooling is the responsibility of both. Wives also have the responsibility to
organize family events, such as weddings, baptisms, and birthday parties. Wives can also decide about the number of children the family is going to raise, and even to choose the color of the house, if it is going to be decorated (Jufresa, 1998; Dominguez, 1998; Salazar-Aguilar, 1998).

In traditional Mayan homeswives are also important contributors of income to the household. In San Juan for example, women are engaged in the production of crafts, such as baskets, hats, typical Mayan tablecloths, and ‘hipiles’, which is a typical Mayan dress. Hats and baskets are made from the abundant natural materials of the jungle. This latter craft activity has increased strongly over the past two years in this community, and is mainly undertaken by women. It provides extra financial support for their livelihoods, especially when women can work in their own home, and at flexible points and periods in time. Healy (1994) points out that an important advantage of handicraft production is that it can provide a cash return to women, children, the handicapped and the elderly. Another advantage that Healy (1994) lists is that handicraft production does not conflict with other rural activities. These crafts are then sold to the ecotourists who visit the community. Apart from being an economic activity for women (Healy, 1994), this also allows them to promote and encourage the maintenance of traditional crafts. In San Juan, women also take an active role in supporting their partners involving themselves in activities such as agriculture and apiculture.

In Punta Allen and Xcalak neither women nor male villagers produce crafts. This is because first, these communities do not see the production of handicrafts as profitable as the lobster harvesting or fishing activities (Dominguez, 1998; Mendoza, 1998; Salazar-Aguilar, 1998). Villagers in these communities, although they realize the importance of promoting the richness of the Mayan culture through the production of traditional local crafts, have not adopted this practice (Stores, personal communication, Punta Allen, 1998). Second, close to Punta Allen and Xcalak a large array and variety of handicrafts can be found (Dominguez, 1998; Mendoza, 1998). For example, in places like Chetumal or Carrillo-Puerto close to Xcalak, and Tulum or Playa del Carmen close to Punta Allen or in Cancun itself, large concentrations of handicraft markets can be found. Moreover, not only local Mayan or Yucatecan crafts can be found but also from other parts of the country. The handicraft market is a highly lucrative and a very commercialized activity for some Mexican non-Mayan outsiders and even for some foreigners (Cohen, 2001). Third, villagers of Punta Allen and Xcalak concur that nobody within the communities has had the initiative to start producing handicrafts as has happened in San Juan. On the other hand, they all believe that abundant natural material from the jungle can be used for those purposes, even spines and bones from dead fish and pincers from dead lobsters can also be used. Creativity and ingenuity for local residents would certainly not be the problem (Carranza, 1998; Dominguez, 1998; Mendoza, 1998; Stores, 1998).

However, in Punta Allen and Xcalak if women do not produce crafts, it is because they are engaged in fishing, lobster harvesting and also in ecotourism activities (e.g. ecotourism guides, lodging and catering). Women in the three communities play a significant role in supporting local livelihoods. This is remarkably important because it shows that women play a crucial role contributing towards household incomes, helping their partners in this responsibility. There is a sense of pride, identity, self-respect and dignity in every woman in these communities. Women are also well identified in the promotion of family traditions and values (Jufresa, 1998; Dominguez, 1998; Salazar-Aguilar, 1998).
The Age Issue in the Mayan Society

The age issue is another important feature within Mayan communities. Mayan society is a traditional one in which the role of elders is crucial for the positive development of the community. Traditionally elders hold most of the knowledge and respect in the community. One of the older (usually the oldest) men in the village is considered the patriarch of the local community. In Mayan language he is called the ‘mem’. According to the villagers the ‘mem’ is the wisest person within the village. He is the person most indicated to give advice and spiritual support when problems arise within the community. In most indigenous local communities, the ‘mem’ is also the local authority appointed by the state government. It should be pointed out that this usually occurs in communities where almost all of its inhabitants are direct descendent of Mayan, which is the case of San Juan. Punta Allen and Xcalak are different in this respect. Although the age issue is still important socially and culturally, in these communities there are no ‘mems’, due to the fact that some of their members come from other regions of the Mexican Republic. Therefore, local authorities are appointed according to other criteria, but not necessarily the age criterion. It should also be pointed out, however, that Punta Allen and Xcalak, according to their community leaders are still proudly considered Mayan communities. This is because in one way or another, they are related socially, culturally and geographically with this civilization (Dominguez, 1998; Salazar-Aguilar, 1998).

The Mayan Language

The Mayan language represents an important feature in the Mayan culture, especially for San Juan villagers. San Juan villagers believe that the Mayan language, which is widely spoken in this community, must remain in order to protect the Mayan identity. Adult people, youngsters and children speak the language. The state government has provided this community with bilingual primary teachers in order to protect and conserve this ethnic language in the community. San Juan is the most geographically isolated of the three communities in this research, and probably the most indigenous in this respect. In Punta Allen and Xcalak, on the other hand, 10 and 5 percent of the villagers speak only the Mayan language, and 90 and 95 percent speak Spanish and Mayan respectively. One of the main reasons for this is that these communities are more exposed to the outside world, as they are not as isolated as San Juan. However, it is certainly true that villagers of these two communities have the ability to speak the Mayan language because of the closeness to original indigenous Mayan speakers. In fact, villagers speak Spanish mixing Mayan or vice versa (Dominguez, 1998; Mendoza, 1998; Salazar-Aguilar, 1998). Villagers in San Juan have realized that the Mayan language is an important cultural attraction as most of ecotourists who have visited the community want to learn some words (Jufresa, 1998). In fact, this represents an incentive for many North American ecotourists to visit these communities (Dominguez, 1998; Mendoza, 1998). According to Dominguez, who is the president of one of the tourism co-operatives in Punta Allen, some American ecotourists have learned very well many words of the Mayan language. Juan Dominguez declared: “In the same way that we have learned some English, these Americans have also learned some Mayan”. Anecdotes like these were also heard in Xcalak. This surely represents a positive implication of ecotourism to these communities. This situation, with no doubt, represents a positive intellectual encounter between national and foreign visitors and local indigenous hosts (Cohen, 1988; Tucker, 1997).

The Mayan communities must not lose their focus on the traditional values, which have characterized them for so many generations: respect for the environment, generosity, hospitality,
honesty and friendliness. These are qualities which, combined with the natural resources found in their communities, will be the magnet to attract those interested in community ecotourism and the Mayan culture. In this sense, there exists a positive symbiotic relationship with nature and the Mayan culture. The most important aspect of this relationship would be the consciousness raising aspect, inculcating between the villagers of Mayan communities and the younger Mayan generations, the deep sense of responsibility necessary to create in them the desire to serve as guardians of the natural resources and their culture (e.g. the Mayan language) in their localities. In fact, most of the Mayans interviewed, especially in San Juan, realized that by conserving their culture they will benefit directly in the long-term and that these benefits may well be economic too. Certainly in this case, local villagers will be most enthusiastic supporters of ecotourism.

Socio-cultural Impacts of Ecotourism in San Juan, Punta Allen and Xcalak

Social and cultural aspects represent two consistent pillars for the communities of San Juan, Punta Allen and Xcalak. These are strong elements in the life of these communities. There is also indivisibility between natural and cultural landscapes, particularly in indigenous communities (Hall 1994, 1998; Cater, 2001b). This is, for instance, the case of these Mayan communities, which have long existed, and still continue with their local traditions in the same natural landscape. At the same time, these aspects constitute important ecotourism resources.

There are several positive cultural aspects that accompany ecotourism development. According to Long (1991, p.205) the attention to local culture can stimulate ethnic pride and conserve cultural heritage. Local arts and crafts may also be preserved as a result of ecotourist interest. Members of the San Juan community, vividly show to the visitors the richness of the Mayan culture through their traditions and customs. These community villagers are reinforcing, in such a way, the roots and origins of a strong, and still alive, Mayan culture. There is also an extraordinary strong sense of belonging to the Mayan community when its members perform original folkloric dances (Jufresa, personal communication, San Juan, 1998). Punta Allen and Xcalak community villagers also perform original festivals and cultural events during the year. These celebrations are mainly religious events, in which almost all the villagers take part. Most of these celebrations are remarkably admired by ecotourists. An intensive interaction between ecotourists and communities members is developed. You et al. (2000, p.1) point out that cultural interaction develops positive tourist-host contact and enhances tourist holiday satisfaction and recurrent visitation.

Positive and Negative Socio-cultural Impacts
Socio-cultural impacts can be positive or negative (Mathieson and Wall, 1982; Lea, 1988; Brown, 1998; Molstad et al., 1999). Potential positive and negative impacts might include:

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<th>Positive</th>
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<td>Building community with pride</td>
<td>Commodification and cheapening of culture and traditions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enhancing the sense of identity of a community</td>
<td>Alienation and loss of cultural traditions</td>
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<td>Promoting the richness of the culture</td>
<td>Undermining of local traditions and ways of life</td>
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Encouraging revival or maintenance of traditional crafts

Proliferation of crime, prostitution and drugs

Broadening community horizons

Increased division between those who do and do not benefit from ecotourism

Enhancing local and external appreciation and support for cultural heritage

Displacement of traditional residents

Loss of authenticity and historical accuracy in interpretation

Findings reveal that villagers in *San Juan, Punta Allen* and *Xcalak* have a similar attitude to the question about negative and positive socio-cultural impacts seen in their communities as a result of ecotourists visiting the area. The questionnaire survey specifically asked if they have seen ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ socio-cultural impacts or ‘no impacts at all’. The percentage of positive impacts was higher than negative impacts in the three communities. Surprisingly, a considerable percentage of villagers responded as not having seen ‘impacts at all’ in their communities. It should be mentioned that all the villagers questioned in the three communities understood well, what was meant by positive and/or negative socio-cultural impacts to their communities according to the previous list. The percentage distributions of responses are given in the Table 1.

In the analysis of these responses given by community villagers, it can be inferred that 34 villagers of 40 in *San Juan* (85%), considered that ecotourism has had positive impacts in their community. These villagers affirmed that ecotourism to their communities has brought a revival of the ethnic origin, community pride and better organized community, as one of the young villagers declared:

“… *Honestly, I didn’t know how vast and rich our culture was. My parents have always told me that we have a rich past, however, I didn’t realise until now that we have visitors to show our culture. I’m really proud to be a member of the younger Mayan generations …*” A 19 year old villager.

On the contrary, 2 villagers (5%) responded that they have only seen negative socio-cultural impacts. It is possible that these villagers have seen the commodification and cheapening of the culture, or the loss of cultural traditions amongst other negative potential impacts. Some villagers in discretion pointed out in informal interviews that these 2 villagers have had problems within the community in the past, and that they were still quite isolated from the rest of the community. Villagers also pointed out that these 2 villagers do not usually take part in community initiatives. According to the survey, 4 villagers (4%) have not seen impacts at all. Although it is not a negative view, it is not a positive one. These villagers perhaps are not well socially and culturally integrated in the life of the community or perhaps have not received any economic benefits from the ecotourism activity.
In Punta Allen, 23 villagers out of 28 surveyed (82%), have seen only positive socio-cultural impacts in this community, 1 villager (4%) has seen negative socio-cultural impacts, and 4 villagers (14%) have not seen socio-cultural changes at all. Although the positive impacts are considerably higher than the negatives ones, it is particularly interesting to observe a high percentage proportion (14%) of villagers responding as not having seen changes at all. This is probably due to ecotourism activity in this community not being well organized, as Juan Dominguez, president of one of the tourism co-operatives in Punta Allen declared:

“… The problem in our community is that ecotourism is still not very well organized here. We, as a members of this community, haven’t reached consensus principally in ecotourism matters. I sometimes feel, that our community needs more unity. This situation, unfortunately, rebounds on other community issues such as culture…” The President of the ‘Vigía Grande’ tourism co-operative in Punta Allen.

As described earlier, there are two tourism co-operatives with no plans or programmes of activities. There are no agreements on tour prices, or scheduled activities. This leads to a degree of confusion between villagers themselves (Dominguez, personal communication, Punta Allen, 1998). Besides that, they feel that Amigos de Sian Ka’an (ASK) plays an unfair role by promoting their own ecotours to the Sian Ka’an reserve and not giving the opportunity to the community. As mentioned earlier, ASK is an NGO operating in the same region, which is also engaged in ecotourism.

In Xcalak, 25 villagers of 30 (83%), have seen positive socio-cultural impacts and only 2 (7%), as in San Juan, have seen negative socio-cultural impacts. Additionally, 3 villagers (10%), have not seen social-cultural impacts at all. Some villagers interviewed in this community actually mentioned that there is probably a division between those local villagers who do receive benefits from ecotourism and those who do not (Salazar-Aguilar, 1998). Without a doubt, there can be a direct correlation between those villagers who said ‘no impacts at all’, with those who are not engaged in ecotourism. However, the number, and consequently the percentage, of those villagers who have seen ‘positive’ sociocultural impacts, from those who are not necessarily engaged in ecotourism are higher. This fact, undoubtedly, shows a positive and sincere attitude of those villagers who are not engaged in ecotourism, but support it. On the other hand, there is also a sense of apathy and resentment from those villagers who cannot invest or take part in ecotourism, as Oscar Salazar-Aguilar, President of the ‘Andrés Quintana Roo’ fisherman co-operative in Xcalak, declared:

“… Most of the time, villagers in this community give their opinion in relation to socio-cultural impacts, according to their level of involvement and profits obtained from ecotourism. Some other villagers feel frustration because they can’t invest in ecotourism infrastructure. In my opinion, it shouldn’t be like that. We, as members of this lively community, must work very hard in order to strengthen our cultural values, and from that, to strongly promote ecotourism to our community…”

The President of the ‘Andrés Quintana Roo’ fisherman co-operative in Xcalak.
Villagers in San Juan, Punta Allen and Xcalak declared that community ecotourism has produced more positive social-cultural impacts than negative ones, however they also stated that their communities should be more receptive and better organized in order to host ecotourists (Jufresa, 1998; Dominguez, 1998; Salazar-Aguilar, 1998). Villagers also manifested that their social and cultural backgrounds were strong enough not to be alienated or transculturated from external cultures (Jufresa, 1998; Dominguez, 1998; Salazar-Aguilar, 1998). In this sense, the demonstration effect, understood as a ‘notable impact of tourism on traditional values’ (Mathieson and Wall, 1982; Fennell, 1999), has not negatively impacted on these communities (Jufresa, 1998; Mendoza, 1998; Salazar-Aguilar, 1998). Villagers in San Juan, Punta Allen and Xcalak have continued and will continue with their original customs and values. The process of commercialisation could not erode their authenticity. Villagers in these communities feel that the strength of their culture, values and customs, means that they will not be alienated by external influences. According to many villagers, their habits will not be affected by the contact with ecotourists, as some of the villagers in San Juan unanimously declared:

“… We are very attached to our culture. Our ethnic pride is very high as well as our customs and values. We don’t believe that external cultures will negatively affect our traditional knowledge, culture and lifestyles. We’ll try our best to keep inheriting our values and cultural expressions to our sons, and the sons of our sons ...”

Finally, ecotourism must be a cooperative relationship between local indigenous villagers and ecotourists who want to enjoy themselves and, at the same time, enrich their consciousness by means of significant educational and cultural experience.

**Acquisition of Local Knowledge and Skills Training through Ecotourism**

It is a fact that villagers in San Juan, Punta Allen and Xcalak understand that they must possess sufficient local knowledge and skills training in order to attend actual and potential ecotourists to the area. This is crucial principally to those villagers who are directly involved in ecotourism. By local knowledge villagers understand knowledge about their history, their roots, their traditions and customs, and their values. Part of that knowledge must include the flora and fauna of the communities, and principally, the way to preserve and conserve them. Additionally, villagers need to have the ability to teach this knowledge to ecotourists. As Hall (1994, p.153) rightly points out, ‘ecotourism development needs to be based not on the culture of the tourist or developers, or conservational groups, but on the values and culture of the host community’. To this end, interpretation, information programmes, and training skills constitute important components if ecotourism is going to be a successful activity in the community (Gurung and de Coursey, 1994; Hall and Kinnaird, 1994; Shuib, 1997; Fennell, 1999; Blamey, 2001).

ASK and the Centre for Tropical Conservation (RARE) have played an important role in training several villagers in Punta Allen. These NGOs have given three ecotourism courses to members of this community (Stores, personal communication, Punta Allen, 1998). One of these courses was to train local villagers to be ecotourism guides. The course included the study of local birds, their habitats and names, both scientific and common, the study of the most common
plants, reptiles and mammals and geological data related to the region. The course programme included the teaching of this knowledge to ecotourists, the protection of the natural resources, the organization of ecotours and the corresponding feedback from ecotourists. Other courses have been focused on pricing and marketing ecotours, and how to personally treat ecotourists, in order to gain their respect for the place and the environment.

Eight persons from Punta Allen have received this training (Stores, personal communication, Punta Allen, 1998). According to them, considerable knowledge has been gained about the protection of the environment and the use of natural resources in relation to ecotourism. In Xcalak, ASK has also given the same courses and additional English language courses (Carranza, personal communication, Cancun, 1998). Villagers who have taken those courses when interviewed, declared that they felt very proud to transmit local knowledge to ecotourists, as one of local ecotourism guides stated:

“… It is great to transmit knowledge to visitors about our culture and nature. However, it is greater to know that these visitors show a real interest in those matters. I feel very happy and proud to be part of that fantastic experience, as mentioned from those visitors…”

A 35 years old local ecotourism guide.

Likewise, villagers declared that ecotourists were very receptive and enthusiastic in learning about the nature and culture of the place, and most importantly, is the fact that ecotourists manifested the possibilities to repeat the visit in the near future (Dominguez, personal communication, Punta Allen, 1998; Batum, personal communication, Xcalak, 1998).

The most important aspect of this type of training programme is the consciousness-raising aspect, inculcating in the local people the deep sense of responsibility which is necessary to create in them the desire to serve as safe-keepers or guardians of the natural resources and culture in their community.

Cultural Sustainability of Ecotourism

According to Mowforth and Munt (1998, p.109) ‘cultural sustainability refers to the ability of people or a people to retain or adapt elements in their culture which distinguish them from other people’. They also point out that societies may be able to continue functioning in social harmony despite the effects of changes brought about by some new input such as tourists. The majority of works on sustainability of tourism put the physical environment as the hub of the issue and people as part of the periphery (Cole, 1997, p.220). The emphasis however, should not only be on environmental sustainability but also on cultural sustainability (Hall, 1998; Cater, 2001b). This is because of the indivisibility of culture and nature discussed earlier. Likewise, Wearing and Neil (1999) comment that ecotourism which does not damage the culture of the host community, ‘encourages respect for the cultural realities experienced by ecotourists through education and organised encounters’.

In relation to this, the modern day Mayan’s view of ecotourism is positive. Ecotourists are affected with good cheer and real affection (Batum, 1998). It is not often that local Mayans will flee or hide when a foreign visitor comes. These incidents are rare and may occur due to a natural shyness in some individuals rather than any animosity or rejection. If local Mayans
comprehend that foreign visitors will not alter their traditions and customs, they will welcome them (Jufresa, 1998; Batum, 1998). As mentioned earlier, villagers in San Juan, Punta Allen and Xcalak cannot be influenced by external cultures. Mayans are by nature friendly, hospitable and openly curious about foreign visitors (Acevedo, 1991).

Nevertheless, the arrival of ecotourists has caused, in some cases, a great misunderstanding on the part of the ecotourists. In some cases, the visitor from a more affluent culture may equate the simple lifestyle in the villages with poverty and, in their desire to help, offer money, which only serves to convert the children and even the adults to beggars (Acevedo, 1991; Faust, 1991). This is a serious negative practice, which, by all means, must be avoided. For the Mayans poverty and wealth are controversial terms (Faust, 1991), what some see as poverty may be seen by others as wealth. As stated in a previous Chapter, villagers in San Juan do not necessarily need money for their survival, almost all their needs are fulfilled by well-managing and using their surrounding natural resources (Jufresa, 1998). Mayans do not see themselves as poor people, they recognize that they are surrounded by plentiful natural resources (Batum, 1998). They have used natural resources for generations. For many Mayans material possessions are not necessarily a sign of wealth, but rather indicate another style of living, using larger amount of resources while others live perfectly well on much less. The ability to survive in primitive conditions is, in a sense, a form of richness.

Mayans without a doubt have exploited remarkably well their natural and cultural resources. There has been a symbiotic relationship between these two elements (Budowski, 1976). Wheeller (1994, p.648), argues that ‘the environment in a tourism context, in addition to the traditional natural/physical perspective, must have a cultural and social dimension’. Additionally, Cater (2001a) declares that ‘ecotourism, by definition, should be socio-culturally responsible’.

There is no doubt that cultural influences from even a small influx of ecotourists are inevitable, but the control of the most harmful effects, emphasis on the responsible behavior of the visitor, and the prevention of distortion of local culture might be assumed to be essential elements of sustainable ecotourism. Wearing (2001, p.395) points out that in order ‘to ensure that ecotourism is able to be maintained, it is essential to ensure the sustainability of both the natural and cultural environments of the destination’. In this sense, local Mayan communities have not registered negative influences from ecotourists visiting the region. On the contrary, their encounters can be classified as positive for both parties (Batum, 1998; Jufresa, 1998; Dominguez, 1998). Thus ecotourism aims to promote and foster a respect and an increase in awareness of other cultures, in fostering mutually beneficial relationships between hosts and ecotourists (Gunson, 1996).

Wearing (2001) suggests that the longer duration of stay from the ecotourist might promote a deeper understanding between the individual ecotourist and individual community members. In turn, this might increase the ecotourist’s understanding of the host community. There are no statistical records about the length of stay in Mayan communities. Usually ecotourists stay from one week to two weeks. There are others who have stayed for two or three months. According to some villagers, there have been ecotourists who have stayed for as long as six months in the communities of Punta Allen and Xcalak (Dominguez, 1998; Mendoza, 1998; Salazar-Aguilar, 1998). In San Juan ecotourists cannot stay overnight for it has no accommodation sites.

Anthropologists who have worked closely with the Mayans for years are not concerned only about aesthetics, or preserving the past (Farris, 1984; Faust, 1991), they know that Mayans have changed and are going to change, ‘Mayans have been changing for thousands of years’ (Faust,
‘They have adapted to the Toltec, the Spanish, the Mexican government, and previous waves of tourists before. We are not concerned about somehow keeping the Mayans “pure”. The Mayans will tell you themselves that they are all mixed now—their race, their language, and their lands. However, they have managed to maintain a sense of their own distinct ethnic identity, a sense of pride and dignity’ (Farris, 1984; Faust, 1991).

**Community Cultural Empowerment through Ecotourism**

Some authors recognise that local cultures can be, and are, disturbed and affected by ecotourism (Croall, 1995; Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996a; Scheyvens and Purdie, 1999; Wesche and Drumm, 1999), but not all ecotourism researchers and experts subscribe to the view that it is necessarily negative for all host communities. Rather, ecotourism can benefit an area by bringing prosperity and employment, especially when industry and agriculture or fishing are in decline (Nuttall, 1997), but, most importantly, ecotourism must be considered as a complementary economic activity. Lanfant (1995, cited in Nuttall, 1997) refuses to see ecotourism as simply as an exogenous force, arguing that some communities are not always passive but ‘often seize upon ecotourism as a means of communication to display their existence and to establish their own power’. In this way, local communities can use ecotourism to develop strategies for self-determination and cultural survival. There is a sense of cultural empowerment when indigenous communities experience positive cultural impacts. This is the case in the community of *San Juan*, where local villagers have performed a cultural play. This cultural show called “San Juan—living culture”, takes place in the natural settings of the Mayan jungle, where approximately 70 villagers re-enact their ancient ceremonies and legends. The play is performed in the original Mayan native tongue enabling ecotourists to blend in the Mayan culture. Afterwards there is a brief English and Spanish explanation accompanied with leaflets in these two languages. Prior to the play, a brief glossary is given to ecotourists to help them understand some directions. An example of this glossary follows.

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<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>Mayan</th>
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<tr>
<td>Welcome</td>
<td><em>Bienvenido</em></td>
<td><em>Hulel</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow me</td>
<td><em>Sígueme</em></td>
<td><em>Co’oneex</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please, have a seat</td>
<td><em>Siéntate, por favor</em></td>
<td><em>Xecha-hal</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please wait</td>
<td><em>Espera por favor</em></td>
<td><em>Wa lenex</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thank you</td>
<td><em>Muchas gracias</em></td>
<td><em>Yatsil</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See you soon!</td>
<td><em>Nos vemos pronto!</em></td>
<td><em>Tu la’ak kin!</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The positive cultural impact, from the indigenous Mayan culture’s perspective, is that a genuine interest in the local culture to sustain and even revive traditional cultural practices emerges (Jufresa, personal communication, *San Juan*, 1998). Jufresa (1998) points out that *San
Juan villagers have played a remarkable role in enacting their characters in the play. Elders and youngsters, men and women, all have successfully participated in the planning and organisation of the play. Although villagers receive a special training to take part in the play as actors and actresses, they have manifested that they feel their characters very deeply because they know that they are part of the Mayan civilisation. Spectators, who have seen “San Juan – living culture” cultural show, have admitted complete satisfaction with the experience. They have admired part of the Mayan tradition and customs and would strongly recommend others to see it (Jufresa, 1998).

According to Ashley, Roe and Goodwin (2001, p.26), ‘optimism, pride and participation’ are positive manifestations when local communities have access to information, and participate in planning processes. Nuttall (1997, p.224) exemplifies that some Alaskan native local tourism enterprises are ‘linked to the politics of community empowerment, with some companies arguing that cultural preservation is only possible through cultural presentation and by educating visitors about indigenous ways of life’. Therefore, it is vital for a community to preserve and conserve its identity, lifestyles, needs and priorities in the face of ecotourism development (Fagence, 1998, p.116).

The role of Local, State and National Governments in Protecting Socio-cultural Values of the Communities

It has to be said that the government in Mexico in its three levels: local, state and national rarely supports ecotourism and, to a lesser extent, the socio-cultural values of the communities. One of the main reasons for this, according to Evans (1994) is the structure of the Ministry of Tourism in the country (SECTUR). Mexico has a highly centralised tourism development system, emphasising its national economic importance. Barkin (2000) points out that ‘as with most public policy formulation in Mexico during the past fifteen years, the emphasis on encouraging private investment with infrastructure investments and attractive credit facilities has been combined with a privatisation of publicly held properties that created attractive opportunities for four and five star tourist developments in the beach resorts and adjoining regions; financing for these mega-projects is quite generous, in contrast to the absence of any special programmes in other parts of the country’. This is why Mexico, unlike other less developed countries embarked on rapid tourism development (Evans, 1994). Places such as Cancun, Bahías de Huatulco, Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo, Loreto-Nopoló and Los Cabos, grew dramatically in the past 20-25 years, completely ignoring adjacent rural communities.

The bias against community ecotourism is further reinforced by another characteristic of public policy formulation in the country with regard to tourism in general: the people appointed to Ministerial rank at both the national and state levels are frequently chosen for their political connections rather than for their knowledge of the sector; even in those instances where they have experience in the area, their programmes and plans usually are designed to further their personal investments and create new personal opportunities, and are rarely oriented towards an overall plan for balanced development, that takes into account environmental considerations and the needs of the various social groups. At the state level, Barkin (2000) declares that ‘personal interests dominate public decision-making’. Additionally, there are frequent changes of staff within in the Ministry of Tourism causing, in consequence, serious conflicts. Mader being interviewed by Belejack (1999) quotes:
"...The biggest problem is that within Sectur, the office for ecotourism has had revolving door officials. In the past five years of researching this topic, I’ve talked to ten people in charge. If Mexico sincerely wants to promote ecotourism, it has to have more continuity as well as improve its information sharing. Other countries such as Costa Rica, such as Ecuador, have good tourism offices in all major cities…"

Another problem is that the Federal Tourism Law (Ley Federal de Turismo, LFT) being the main legal instrument in implementing, encouraging, managing, controlling and monitoring tourism in Mexico, does not contemplate ecotourism as a substantial economic activity. The Federal Tourism Law (LFT) shares the vision that the best, and more profitable way, is to promote large-scale operators organized according to an international model based on large hotels, managed by transnational providers or their national counterparts (Barkin, 2000). This vision excludes local communities or rural producers as potential providers of ecotourism activity (Barkin, 2000). This ‘law’ according to Jufresa (1998, personal communication, Cancun), has been only designed ‘to make richer the already rich Mexican or foreign big tourism investors who have heavily invested in tourism resorts such as Cancun or Bahías de Huatulco, to give an example’.

This law neither promotes, in any aspect, the future development of ecotourism in the country, nor the active involvement of local communities in socio-cultural matters. Local Mayan communities have already realized that the government will hardly support them, so that these communities have to work together for their own welfare, rather than depend on state and federal government institutions. In fact, they receive and have received little more support from the state government than from the federal government. The state government, for example, has helped the Punta Allen community to buy an electric generator. One third of the financial outlay required was contributed by the state government, one third of the money came from the local ‘Vigía Chico’ fishermen co-operative, and the remaining third from the villagers themselves (Mendoza, 1998; Dominguez, 1998). Electric power represents a vital infrastructural component for the benefit of the local community as well as for ecotourism activity. In Xcalak, the state government has recently built a highway which connects the village to an important state motorway (Carranza, 1998). This was probably done because the state and federal governments have considerable economic and political interests in the region. It is important to mention here that the Costa Maya project considers Xcalak as an important component of its overall ecotourism development (Guillen-Arguelles, 2001).

It seems that the federal government and its Federal Tourism Law only supports, promotes and encourages tourism investments in which local communities are not included. According to Barkin (2000) the model of locally controlled, resource-based tourism that caters to a small group of foreign ecotourists or to a middle-class domestic clientele, ‘is not a part of the image of the “smokestack free export industry” that tourism authorities cherish so dearly’.

While official policy seems to be unaware of the importance of ecotourism as an instrument to decentralized development, new initiatives are being implemented throughout the country. Examples can be seen in some Mexican states such as Chiapas, Yucatán, Veracruz (Suárez-Bonilla and Ibarra-Pouliot, 1998), and in some communities in the state of Quintana Roo such as San Juan, Punta Allen and Xcalak. In these states some rural communities and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are actively engaged in developing their own
alternatives to traditional mass tourism destinations and activities. It has sometimes been very
difficult for these communities. However, there is a growing experience of grass-roots initiatives
to promote community ecotourism. Villagers in these communities believe that there are great
possibilities for them to attract sensitive visitors interested in their cultural heritage, their natural
beauty, and their potential contribution to protect biodiversity. They firmly believe these goals
can be accomplished.

Conclusions
This paper contributes to the literature in a number of ways. First, it contributes as stated by
Zeppel (1997), the benefits of ecotourism for rural or indigenous communities include
preservation of cultural traditions, conservation of the natural environment and maintenance of
social, cultural and religious values. Second, the paper provides the vision of the ecotourism in
remote areas with limited development; ecotourism can improve the quality of life, self-esteem
and well being of local and indigenous communities. Finally, the paper discusses the Culturally,
Mayan communities such as San Juan, Punta Allen and Xcalak could benefit from ecotourism
and ecotourism could benefit from the active participation of these living Mayan communities.

Traditionally the cultural heritage of the Mayan is based on knowledge of, and respect for,
their local natural resources. Thus, Mayan communities could benefit greatly by a programme
of ecotourism development, which was based on a concern for sustainable, mixed use, with low
environmental impact and low level technologies. This would be culturally as well as
environmentally appropriate providing it shows respect for:

- local knowledge of the community natural resources,
- traditional patterns of symbiotic interaction with them,
- the value Mayan communities place on collective strategies for coping with change, and,
- the traditional forms of individual accountability in the use of community-managed
  resources.

The sustainable ecotourism development process must not only be economically and
environmentally sustainable, but also must preserve and conserve socio-cultural resources of the
area. The success of the Mayan community-based ecotourism strongly depends on the adequate
support and intervention of local communities, governmental authorities, government agencies,
NGOs, and the private sector.

Acknowledgements

The author’s gratefully acknowledges financial support from Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y
Tecnología (Council of Science and Technology), and the Dirección General de Institutos
Tecnológicos –DGTI (The General Directorate of Technological Institutes).

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**Table**

Table 1. Socio-cultural Impacts derived from Ecotourism in San Juan, Punta Allen and Xcalak in 1998

(Based on Surveys made to Individuals in each Community)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community:</th>
<th>What kind of impacts have you seen in your community as a result of ecotourists coming to visit the area?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Juan</td>
<td>n = 40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punta Allen</td>
<td>n = 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xcalak</td>
<td>n = 30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>